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Introduction by Mary Dewhurst Lewis

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Introduction by Mary Dewhurst Lewis, Harvard University

Any teacher of European imperial history probably has given some version of a lecture suggesting that World War II contributed to the end of empire. The argument goes something like this: the Allied victory over the Nazis delegitimized racist empire as a form of governance. Moreover, because Japan had occupied much of the British, Dutch, and French Empires in Southeast Asia during the war, colonized subjects realized that the racial hierarchies buttressing European imperialism could be upended; this encouraged them to push back against European reconquest after Japan's retreat. Finally, there was the fiscal question: European imperial powers after the war were totally broke, and to spend money on shoring up the empire at a time when citizens in the metropole still faced rationing of key foodstuffs was politically risky. As a result, European governments – especially Britain and France – cut loose their imperial holdings in some places and, in others, sought to remake empire by creating 'commonwealths' intended to bind colonial subjects to the metropole in a looser form of imperial control.

In his new book, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918-1940*, Martin Thomas suggests that empire ended a different way. First, he changes our chronology, arguing that the Great Depression catalyzed imperial change before the war did. Second, like Frederick Cooper, whose magisterial *Decolonization and African Society* showed how the combination of political and economic demands of African laborers after the Second World War made empire in Africa too expensive to maintain for Britain and France alike,¹ Thomas suggests that political economy, rather than political ideology, lay at the heart of the end of empire. The economic crisis was important because it laid bare the extractive underpinnings upon which almost all European imperial endeavors were based. As is well known, the Depression began as an agricultural crisis and then spread to other sectors of the economy. Colonial economies were profoundly affected by the Depression because they were driven, to a very great extent, by the extraction of primary resources such as minerals and oil or the cultivation of agricultural products such as rubber plants or groundnuts. With commodity prices falling and markets shrinking, colonial enterprises – which had always engaged in coercive labor practices – ratcheted up the level of coercion and control while squeezing wages. Colonial police, who formally worked for the state but who saw a connection between colonial enterprise and the future of that state, frequently were called in as the hand-maidens of imperial capitalist enterprise. (But they were also caught between a rock and hard place because colonial state leaders often understood that labor reform was essential to maintaining colonial peace; Thomas illustrates this paradox nicely). In Thomas's account, repression of workers was often quite brutal and sometimes fueled anti-colonial nationalism, which in turn was repressed with still more violence. But nationalism, for Thomas, is not the main story.

¹ Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

The reviewers take different lessons from this conclusion: Raphaëlle Branche finds that “one of the major contributions of Thomas’s work lies in clearly identifying the turning points where, in order to survive, the colonial orders had to become more flexible and the police had to adapt.” It is interesting that Branche, a historian of the illegal torture tactics that were deployed by the French army in Algeria between 1954 and 1962 (hardly an instance of policing becoming more flexible),² interprets *Violence and Colonial Order* this way, while Talbot Imlay concludes that the “economic crisis ... made it clear that as a political-economic system, European imperialism was unviable.” Could it be reformed or was it doomed to fail? These differing interpretations point, I think, to the sheer volume of examples Thomas provides, not all of which lend themselves to the same conclusions. In some places, intensive policing helped increase profits; in others, it backfired. Thomas might have done more to explain when and why police brutality achieved its goals or became “routine” (100) and why it was counterproductive in others. As Imlay asks, “were some colonial police forces more active or complicit in the repression of worker unrest than others?” Thomas offers a clue in his subtle treatment of Michelin’s power in colonial Vietnam, as he deftly analyzes the growing estrangement between the colonial state and the rubber tire business; but this nuance is not brought to every example.

How could it be? As this forum’s reviewers have observed, *Violence and Colonial Order* is immense in its scope and erudition. Thomas ably compares and contrasts cases as different as oil fields in Tobago and rubber plantations in Indochina. The work is driven by original empirical research but also demonstrates an impressive grasp of the relevant secondary literature. Coming just five years after his superb analysis of colonial intelligence gathering, *Empires of Intelligence* (2007), one cannot help but marvel at how he has managed to produce another ambitious and original work at such a clip. Surely it is the hallmark of a provocative work that each of the reviewers wanted more: Matthew Stanard wonders what the story would have looked like with British India or the Soviet land empire in the mix, though he calls his question “facetious” since he recognizes the feat Thomas has pulled off. David Edgerton, observing that police got involved in industrial disputes in metropolitan centers, too, wants to know more about how “management, work organization, and internal policing differ[ed] between the colonial and rich worlds.” Branche speculates that a “closer analysis of the gestures of violence that were ordered, selected, and ultimately carried out” might nuance Thomas’s argument about the police as “outsiders.” Imlay wonders what would happen if one compared Thomas’s case studies to the very repressive and yet “successful” empires (in terms of longevity), such as the Portuguese empire in Africa. I myself wondered why he had not included Kenya, where exploitation of wage labor in the 1920s and 1930s set the stage for the later Mau Mau uprising.³ Thomas’s analysis also leaves one wondering why the most egregious acts of

² Raphaëlle Branche, *La Torture et l’armée pendant la guerre d’Algérie, 1954-1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

³ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: Norton, 2005); Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004).

colonial violence often seemed disconnected from economic concerns.⁴ The Algerian War remains the quintessential example of colonial violence (and counter-violence), but one would be hard-pressed to argue that its underpinnings were primarily economic (even if oil was discovered in the Sahara part way through the war, making the resolution of the war more difficult). Some brief discussion of the cases that were *not* included might have helped clarify the argument and its scope.

This quibbling about cases aside, the reviewers agree that the return to what Thomas calls “political economy” is a fruitful shift away from the cultural analyses of power that have dominated the “New Imperial History” and postcolonial studies in the past few decades.⁵ In 2003, Stuart Ward predicted that growing interest in globalization would allow “the field of ‘imperial history’ to stage a major comeback, reclaiming ground that had been lost during the proliferation of area studies.”⁶ In short order, we had books like Niall Ferguson’s *Empire* and, from a different political perspective, John Darwin’s *After Tamerlane*, which explicitly connected imperialism and globalization.⁷ By making political economy central to his thesis, Thomas joins this trend. Yet by concentrating on policing, he takes it in a fresh direction that builds thematically – albeit not methodologically – on the attention paid by postcolonial studies to questions of inequality and exploitation. Still, like other materialist historians of imperialism, Thomas expressly aims to paint a very big picture of empire by looking comparatively within and across imperial systems. One of the dangers of this broad scope, of course, is the potential to lose sight of the people living under imperial rule. These individuals are present in Thomas’s work, but mostly they are the people whose economic lives are policed; more political agency is given, in many instances, to the companies that employed them than to the rebellious workers themselves. That may accurately reflect the power differential in colonial economic life, but, as Stanard observes, “[t]his is not an archaeology of colonial violence as experienced by those on the receiving end.”

⁴ As Benjamin Brower observes, the Sahara at the time of the brutal “first” French-Algerian war in the nineteenth century was a “land with no demonstrated economic or strategic value.” Benjamin Claude Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France’s Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844–1902* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 9, 43. One could make a similar argument about German Southwest Africa, the site of the world’s first “genocide.” See Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁵ The work that can be described as fitting within the “New Imperial History” is too vast to cite in its entirety here. The argument for the “new imperial history” is outlined by Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1–26. Scholarship in the “new imperial history” builds on the insights of “postcolonial studies.” Both are greatly indebted to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁶ Stuart Ward, “Transcending the Nation: A Global Imperial History?” in Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 52.

⁷ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008).

I agree, but this is not unusual for Thomas, whose trademark approach has been to focus on patterns of human behavior (or misbehavior), rather than on individuals. This was evident in *Empires of Intelligence*, which demonstrated that incorrect assumptions about communist agitation, the appeal of pan-Islam, or colonized people's political aptitudes colored intelligence and misled colonial governments. Thomas has also been in the forefront of comparative imperial history. This is particularly welcome for a field of scholarship that, while vast in territorial scope, has been oddly insular – especially in the modern era – in its focus on single empires as if they were coherent entities. By comparing empires, particularly those of the British and French, Thomas highlights the continuities between two powers whose imperial styles are so often contrasted as well as fissures within each of these empires. Indeed, Thomas joins Frederick Cooper as one of the few scholars actively bringing the *French* empire into a conversation about imperial power as part of a broader modern world system. This is not to say that there are not plenty of erudite works on French colonialism in particular places or that compare different outposts of the French empire. But there are few works covering the modern era that integrate French colonial history into a world history of imperialism. Thomas's work does that, and it does so in a way that should be of interest to historians of all modern empires, as well as their constituent parts. The trend toward “big” imperial history need not supplant area studies at all but can draw on and, hopefully, foster them.

Participants:

Martin Thomas is Professor of European Imperial History and Director of the Centre for War, State, and Society at the University of Exeter. He has written extensively on colonial politics and patterns of dissent, including *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Control after 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) and, with Bob Moore and L.J. Butler, *Crises of Empire. Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States, 1918-1975* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008) He is currently completing a comparative study of French and British decolonisation, *Fight or Flight: France, Britain and their Roads from Empire* to be published with Oxford University Press in 2014.

Mary Dewhurst Lewis is Professor of History at Harvard University. Her first book, *The Boundaries of the Republic: Migrant Rights and the Limits of Universalism in France, 1918-1940*, was published by Stanford University Press in 2007 and translated into French by Éditions Agone in 2010. Her second book, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881-1938*, is forthcoming in November 2013 from the University of California Press. She is currently in the early stages of a project on inter-colonial migration.

Raphaëlle Branche is an assistant professor in Modern History at the University of Paris-1-Panthéon-Sorbonne, currently member of the Institut Universitaire de France. She works extensively on French colonialism, focusing on Algeria and the violent aspects of colonization. She is currently working on prisoners of war during the Algerian war of independence. Her publications in English include *Rape in Wartime*, edited with Fabrice Virgili, Palgrave/Macmillan, 2012; “The Martyr's Torch: Memory and Power in Algeria”,

Journal of North African Studies, vol.16, 3, Septembre 2011, p. 431-444; “The French in Algeria: Can There be Prisoners of War in a ‘Domestic’ Operation?” in Sibylle Scheipers (ed.), *Prisoners in War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.173-186; “Sexual Violence in the Algerian War” in Dagmar Herzog (ed.), *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe’s Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 247-260; “The French State Faced with the Algerian Nationalists (1954-1962): A War against Terrorism?” in Samy Cohen (ed.), *Democracies at war against terrorism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 280 p., p. 59-76; “Silences on State violence during the Algerian War of Independence (France and Algeria, 1962-2007)” (with James House) in Jay Winter, Efrat ben-Ze’ev and Ruth Ginio (dir.), *Shadows of War. A Social Construction of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.115-137.

David Edgerton will from summer 2013 be Professor of Modern British History and Hans Rausing Professor of the History of Science and Technology at King’s College London. Among his books are *England and the Aeroplane* (1991 and 2013), *Warfare State: Britain 1920-1970* (2006) and *Britain’s War Machine* (2011). He is currently working on a history of twentieth-century Britain.

Talbot C. Imlay teaches in the history department at the Université Laval in Québec, Canada. With Martin Horn he has just finished a book entitled *The Politics of Industrial Collaboration: Ford France, Vichy and Nazi Germany during the Second World War*. He is currently writing a book on European socialists and international politics from 1918 to 1960.

Matthew G. Stanard is Associate Professor in the Department of History at Berry College and author of *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism* (University of Nebraska Press, 2011). He has authored a number of essays on European overseas imperialism including the forthcoming “Digging-In: The Great War and the Roots of Belgian Empire,” in *Empires in World War I: Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict*, edited by Richard Fogarty and Andrew Jarboe (spring 2013, I. B. Tauris). He teaches courses on world history, historiography, modern European history, Africa since 1800, and a course on imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism. He is on leave fall 2013 to work on an essay on Belgian culture and the legacies of empire after 1960 as well as a study of colonial state controls on flows of people and information in the Belgian Congo 1945-60.

Martin Thomas is one of the foremost specialists in the history of colonial empires in the interwar period. He returns to his period of expertise to put forth a stimulating reinterpretation of the impact of economic mutations on the political upheavals within the European empires of the time. In this comparative history project, Thomas invites us to take a different look at the role of economic factors in history, while also proposing a new focal point. His analysis, while presented in a territorial or imperial framework, actually takes place on a much smaller scale. To complete such an undertaking successfully, the historian must plunge not only into political history, but also and especially the social and economic history of the areas studied. Thomas's book excels in its micro-scale focus with the repeated use of in-depth analyses drawing on works by specialists in each of the areas studied.

After an introduction and three chapters to explain the context behind the book's theme, Thomas covers nine case studies from three continents, comparing French, British and even Belgian colonialism. Thus, we go from the small island of Trinidad to the large colony of Congo, from the Northern Nigeria Protectorate to the various territories of French Indochina, from the mines of Tunisia to the sugarcane fields of Jamaica. Thomas's aim is not so much to look at what differentiated empires. Instead, he seeks to highlight the common features of the rationale of economic exploitation at work in colonized territories, and especially what this reveals about how empires functioned at a particular moment in their lifespan, when the military conquests were complete and imperial resilience was tested by the shared trials of World War I.

The series of individual case studies makes sense because Thomas invites his readers to shift their focal points. In order to get inside the rationales of political economy at work, and to identify how an economic rationale and a political project are combined in a colonial territory, he proposes looking at the workings of the forces of police repression. The heart of this project is to characterize colonial policing in the interwar period and to link it not with national or territorial differences, but instead with degrees of interpenetration of economic and political interests. This analysis can be fruitfully combined with the suggestion of Ann Stoler (whom Martin Thomas readily cites) that scholars employ the term "imperial formations" rather than "empires"¹: "The emphasis shifts from fixed forms of sovereignty and its denials, to graduated forms of sovereignty and what has long marked the technologies of imperial rule – sliding and contested scales of differential rights" (7).

Thomas argues that "political economy offers the best guide to understanding what colonial police were called upon to do," and that "police operations reflected not just the colonial political order but its economic structures as well" (2, 25). Indeed, most police operations in the colonies during this period cannot be immediately categorized as political repression. These operations were indeed aimed at re-establishing order, but in economic

¹ Ann Laura Stoler, « Imperial Debris: Reflections in Ruins and Ruination », *Cultural Anthropology*, 23 :2 (2008).

areas disrupted by colonized peoples in revolt over their living or working conditions, be it in mines, factories or fields. Police forces, regardless of their differences – and Martin Thomas skillfully depicts these differences – were tasked with ensuring the conditions for the territory’s main economic activities. In the numerous examples described, Thomas identifies the economic nodes of each area studied and shows how some economic activities were so tightly interwoven with a territory’s continued colonial identity (because such activities provided the bulk of exports, were the main source of tax revenues, etc.) that their survival was necessary for the very survival of the political system. Thus, the police were logically involved in breaking strikes, forcibly driving workers to the fields, or breaking down the leaders of protest movements against unsanitary housing conditions.

Countering the view of colonial police forces as being focused on repressing nationalism, Martin Thomas states: “The link between changing economic conditions and consequent treatment of colonial workforces is the most recurrent marker of European colonial policing between the two world wars” (325). “Structural economic changes” (47) are what ultimately explain forms of colonial policing in this period. Moreover, the impact of the Great Depression on the global economy and throughout the empires supports evidence that looks particularly persuasive in the comparative historical approach, because every country was affected. “The economic imperatives of colonial policing, frequently implicit in the colonial experience before the depression years, became nakedly transparent as a consequence of the depression itself [...]. “The depression made explicit what had been implicit: that the forces of colonial order were ultimately geared to protection of commercial interest and colonial wealth extraction” (326). The coercive model at work in most of the territories studied was exhausted after the Great Depression. More precisely, the economic crisis led to such pressure on native workers and the colonized society at large that an overly repressive model triggered substantial abuses that threatened the very survival of the colonial order. One of the major contributions of Thomas’s work lies in clearly identifying the turning points where, in order to survive, the colonial orders had to become more flexible and the police had to adapt.

Taking an overall approach to this period brings nuances to a view that fosters the idea of the political order being at the service of economic interests – which in turn underlay the political order. While the existence of converging interests backs this conclusion at certain times, a longer-term analysis contradicts this mechanical and servile construction of political power. The 1930s crisis clearly revealed not only the lack of consensus on methods, but also persistent diverging interests between the colonial administration and economic interests, which were notably represented by the colonists. In fact, these divergences are related to the place that each of these two stakeholders gave to colonized peoples and to the expression of their grievances. The history of colonial policing must be read within a three-part relationship (between government, business, and police) whose tensions also cast light on fluctuations in colonial policing. Thus, we agree entirely with Thomas’s statement: “Colonial business, then, stood at the interface of colonial governmental concerns about long-term political stability. In part, it was a core interest to be protected; in part, its privileges and activities undermined the very security that was sought” (163).

In addition to this three-sided relationship, we must also include the populations of the territories being considered, regardless of their origins. Immediately after World War I, “two prerequisites – deterrence and economy – underpinned the architecture of repressive legal powers” (64), leading to coercive practices that were conceived of as being “pre-emptive” (65). Indeed, we must bear in mind the intrinsic weakness of empires, which owed their survival to the absence of converging revolts by colonized populations. Furthermore, the fear created by any protest movement is a sign of a weakness felt in all colonial empires. This fear and this weakness were the basis of the two prerequisites; they also enable us to assess the shift in colonial policing in the 1930s.

To assess changes, we must look at the relationship between the police and colonial society. As Thomas already showed in a previous book, a history of colonial policing cannot avoid addressing the social history of the police itself.² The viewpoint of native populations must be taken into account, not only during revolts, but also when they serve in the police forces. The role of local policing actors is essential here, and still needs to be analyzed more precisely. Examples include European guards training local militiamen in charge of protecting particular companies, or men recruited by a local chieftain with various responsibilities ranging from defending a community to taking part in a colonial policing operation led by a European officer. The question of the trust that governmental or economic players had in police forces is crucial here, and refers to the colonial project and how it was perceived in colonized societies. An in-depth analysis of the rationales for violence should comprehensively address these questions of personnel, trust and interests.

The “routine repression” (100) that Thomas identifies in police practices does indeed reflect a view of native populations as always being particularly subversive. This low level intensity of violence that the historian can discern must also be analyzed as a symptom of an uneasy order, more certain of its weaknesses than its strengths. However, can we assert that the police, in its internal functions or in its understanding of the situation and its habitus, is always an outsider to the world that it polices (327)? Perhaps a closer analysis of the gestures of violence that were ordered, selected, and ultimately carried out on a daily basis would give more nuances to this view. We can indeed suppose that, in order to function, colonial policing could not remain strictly outside native societies, but had to adjust to what these societies would accept and perceive. This reciprocal accommodation between colonized populations and the colonial framework contributed in fact to the routine shaping of life in the colonies. This routine, including even its violence, was challenged by the economic crisis, which pushed the system into a corner and, in the case of police forces, sometimes drove them to awful excesses.

These excesses in economic situations and in repression largely led to the final sequence that Thomas identifies. In the late 1930s, overall, the winds of change began to blow across colonized territories. While organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) are no stranger to this process, the main driver was local. Concessions had to be

² Martin Thomas, *Empires of intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

made, both economically (e.g. by raising the minimum wage in agriculture) and politically (by freeing political prisoners and authorizing unions and public assemblies). World War II partly interrupted this sequence, which resumed after 1945. Here, Martin Thomas reminds us that the liberalization movement that largely characterized the post-War period was rooted in the 1930s and, ultimately, in an economic and political order threatened by the Great Depression. The changing scales of analysis also break with a traditional chronological breakdown. Also on this point, this thought-provoking book wins our approval.

Review by David Edgerton, King's College London

In the recent past cultural history has been much more popular than economic history in elite academic institutions. This is as much a question of subject matter as method, for all the claims of cultural history to generality. It is telling that while cultural history has embraced consumption as a key topic, production has been neglected. In the case of imperial history the self-presentation of much recent work is that fuddy-duddy old imperial history has been replaced with a new cultural reading of empire, which has broadened the scope of the subject matter. Yet that broadening has displaced, rather than included, that obviously significant aspect of human life we label the economic. Martin Thomas rightly notes that political economy has acquired a certain “fustiness” (26). But this has consequences: as Timothy Mitchell notes quite correctly, the cultural turn has re-enforced the standard narratives outside the realm of conventional definitions of the cultural.¹

The neglect of the economy, of political economy, and of production, is now being noted by historians, and being rectified in novel ways. In fields relevant to the concerns of H-Diplo readers a particularly important case is Adam Tooze’s study of Nazi Germany, which among its many virtues might be considered an economic history of events, and one in which the intimate links between the economy, policing, and violence are especially clearly delineated.² In imperial history Thomas’s book is notable in showing that political economic factors are a powerful factor in explaining developments in colonial policing, particularly in the 1930s. Indeed in this rich, comparative study Thomas concludes that “the protests which took up most colonial police time after 1918 were more industrial rather than political in origin” (325). The police were “a pillar of colonial economic activity” (326).

It needs to be stressed that only some political economies dealt with the role of policing and violence in economic activity, even in the case of empire. Much political economic history of empire has been about finance and trade, the balance of advantage between metropolis and colony, the effects on colonial development of particular imperial regimes. This is true of P.J. Cain’s and A. Hopkins’ extraordinary economic history of the British empire.³ For while it sought to bring back the material into the history of empire, it was essentially a financial and commercial history, specifically of the relations between London and the formal and informal empires. Such a history was not concerned with what was produced in the empire; it was not a history of imperial production, or of economic activity more generally. But interest in particular productive facilities is returning, in new guises,

¹ Timothy Mitchell, *The Rule of Experts Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2002), pp. 2-3.

² Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and the Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

³ P. J. Cain and A. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: 1688-2000*, 2nd edition (London: Pearson, 2001).

and from many directions including environmental history,⁴ and from a refreshed global labour history too.⁵ There is great interest too, in commodities of empire, to cite the name of an important collective project, and not least in how they were produced.⁶

Thomas's achievement is to bring together two aspects of imperial history, policing and violence on the one hand, and political economy and production on the other. His focus is, however, on policing, and his argument is that policing was not merely political and anti-nationalist but also economic, especially from the 1930s. His central point is to note the sheer weight of economic policing in the total policing effort, and that this is common across the British, French and Belgian empires in the 1930s. Everywhere economic policing was at least as important as political policing; the global political economic trumped the empire-specific features of systems of policing and repression. Everywhere, falling commodity prices, and falling exports, led to wages being driven down, unemployment increasing, and greater pressure on workers, especially in the early 1930s. New miseries and repressions visited much of the colonial world.

Colonial police forces were not, however, modern in scale or scope, they were small and barely professionalised. In the interwar years French and British imperial territories had nothing like the policing they would have after the Second World War. They mirrored the society they policed in that they were often multi-racial, officered by expatriate whites and made up of native effectives, but often non-native non-whites, as the prevalence of the Sikh policeman in the eastern British empire testifies. White British police officers in the colonies were rather different from their seeming equivalent at home – they were in command of men – and in status and class origins ranking well above the domestic British constable.

Thomas makes very clear that it was not usually the colonial economy in general which was critical in policing, but very particular types of production sites, mainly producing goods for export, together with railways, docks and so on. Colonial territories, at least the ones treated here, were places where the export-oriented industries typically consisted of relatively few, but large, production sites. By the standards of a European farm, a rubber plantation in Vietnam or Malaya was a vast organisation – it was really comparable not to a farm at all, but a mix of farm and factory, presided over by managers. Michelin employed

⁴ John Scoluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005). Myrna I. Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵ John Tully, *The Devil's Milk: A social history of Rubber* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011). Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009. International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam has done a great deal of work <http://www.iisg.nl/research>.

⁶ Commodities of Empire project. <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/ferguson-centre/commodities-of-empire/index.shtml>. See also the anti-commodities project at Wageningen University <http://www.tad.wur.nl/UK/People/Faculty/Harro/Commodities+and+anti-commodities/>

4,000 in its Vietnam rubber plantations (151). Mines and factories were often spectacularly large too. By British standards, the iron-ore mines of Sierra Leone, the oil refineries of Trinidad, and the sugar processing centres of Jamaica were enormous. Many other facilities, if not larger than the metropolitan equivalent, were nevertheless large: there were few dry docks in the world comparable to the one completed in Singapore in the 1930s. Thus Thomas's story is not so much of industrial or agricultural sectors, but of particular facilities and particular firms, including the Compagnie des phosphates et des chemins de Sfax-Gafsa (Tunisia), the Union Minière du Haut Katanga (Congo), Sierra Leone Development Co Ltd (DELCO), the Sierra Leone Selection Trust, United British Oilfields (Shell) and Trinidad Leaseholds, both oil companies in Trinidad.

Typically such enterprises were operated by foreign, expatriate, managers and technicians, themselves a neglected feature of the colonial economies. They would generally live very well, with a higher standard of living in many cases than their equivalents at home. They acted also as reserve officers in auxiliary police and army units. They were, it seems, much more likely to carry arms while at work than in the countries they came from. Crucially such men were typically white and enforced racial exclusion at least as severely as colonial officials. In some territories, such as India, there was perhaps greater resistance to non-white railway engineers and the like, than to non-white colonial officers, reflected for example in the fact that Indian higher education was more literary than British. U.S. oil and banana companies maintained a strict apartheid in their operations with a huge gap in rights, wages, and living conditions between white U.S. staff and a variety of others, themselves often segregated, being stricter in this than British imperialists.⁷

As is well known, in many of these large facilities workers were often themselves expatriates, if the term is allowed. Thus Tamils were imported not only into the tea gardens of Ceylon, but the British Malayan rubber plantations. Chinese 'coolies' went to work on Chinese-owned plantations in Malaya; Vietnamese from the north worked on the Michelin plantations in the south of the country. Workers, in sharp distinction to the managers, had much inferior conditions to workers in the rich countries. Workers were often housed on-site by the employer – again a significant difference from most metropolitan enterprises, often without their families. There was generally systematic racial discrimination in pay, conditions, and levels of seniority achievable, with workers subject not only to the despotism of the factory, but also of the colonial labour officers, for whom they were aliens, without even the minimal political rights of locals. In the case of the Congo, local forced labour was used into the 1930s for public works, and peasants were forced to turn to growing particular crops for export, policies which required intensive policing.

Large modern enterprise employing large numbers carried with it the opportunity for workers to organise, to make common cause, and to interrupt production. Large workplaces typically generated collective worker activity, industrial and political, in a way small that workshops and farms did not. Colonial officials who worried that

⁷ Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2006).

industrialisation and plantations, indeed any disruption to local economic order, would bring strikes, subversion, and European political ideas, were quite right to do so. Advanced colonial enterprise went along with advanced politics; the industrial politics of the metropolis were also felt on the periphery; the impact of the Popular Front was felt across the French Empire; the strikes in French factories were replicated elsewhere too. Employers and policemen were as likely to see 'communists' at the source of worker agitation in Malaya as in Sheffield, in Vietnam as in Paris.

The complex racial dimension, and the huge level of inequality, was reflected perhaps in the greater readiness to use lethal force in the colonies than in the metropolis, where there was much less tolerance of demonstrations. In the colonies recourse to firearms was quick and prescribed by policy and practice. Sixteen were killed by gunfire from the authorities in the phosphate mines at Metlaoui, Tunisia, in March 1937 (131); in the most advanced sugar processing centre and plantation in Jamaica, owned by Tate & Lyle, in May 1938, police fired at unarmed demonstrators, killing four (224) and more were killed later elsewhere. In the Trinidad oilfields 14 people died in the summer of 1937. Here personnel from two British cruisers, *Ajax* and *Exeter* – later famous for their participation in the 1939 Battle of the River Plate, rather than for helping put down strikes – provided help to the police and local militia.

In the metropolis, things were different. In Britain neither the generally unarmed police nor troops fired on workers in the interwar years. In France demonstrators of the left and right were shot by police, but not it seems in industrial disputes. But in the U.S. the police did resort to firearms. In 1932 four workers were shot in the course of a Ford strike in Dearborn; in 1937 ten people were shot dead by police in the course of a steel strike in Chicago. Perhaps the point of difference is the prevalence of such events within policing, and within factories. The likelihood of a worker being shot, or a policeman shooting, was much higher in Trinidad than the U.S. Still, there is something to be said for policing and industry in the U.S. sharing characteristics with colonial enterprises, arising no doubt from the highly racialised distinctions between classes.

This leads to another comparative question: how did management, work organisation, and internal policing differ between the colonial and rich worlds. There are many scattered suggestions that managers and foremen in such operations were often armed; that what was taken to be legitimate force could be deployed by managers and internal police forces. That is of course generally a mark of difference with the rich world too.

If we were to ask about the role of police more generally in industrial matters in the rich world, the crucial point to note is that we have no equivalent study to Thomas's. But nevertheless it is clear for example that in the France of the 1930s, there was extensive use of police and army in industrial disputes. It is an interesting question as to where local police forces were as accommodating within say Wales, to the iron ore mines, and the Sierra Leone government and police were to owners and managers of the vast new iron ore mine which started operation in the 1930s. Were there cases in the rich world, as happened in Sierra Leone, where the colonial government organised a Mobile Mines Force,

which became the largest force in the country, but which was semi-secretly funded by the gold and diamond mining companies?

There is also the question (which Thomas addresses) as to the extent to which government and police forces intervened against employers and managers on the side of workers. Clearly this could happen in rich countries, but it also happened to a limited extent in the colonies. By the 1930s especially, political and economic stability suggested the need to control the brutality of some managers, and to stop them from disregarding labour ordinances. Thus Colonial officials took action against brutal Michelin managers in Vietnam, and concerns about the expatriate staff of the oil companies were expressed in Trinidad. Just how far were colonial authorities prepared to go in highly repressive economic hyper-exploitation of workers? The answer must be nowhere near as far as the Nazis would go in Europe in the early 1940s, or the Japanese in Asia (where of course race was again central). But it is worth noting of course that levels of colonial repression in British and French colonies were much greater in the 1940s and 1950s than in the 1920s and 1930s.

Perhaps the point is that while there were very great and important differences between metropolitan and colonial production sites, and in their policing, there were also similarities, just as there were across empires. A point that perhaps emerges is that in the colonial sphere, in the single great factory or plantation, the links between capital and state, between the economy and repression are so much more visible and obvious (as is political policing of course), than in the more populous and more industrial rich world. Crucial features of modernity (including the racial dimension) are laid bare in the colonies, while the general case is perhaps less visible. It is perhaps not only that techniques of labour control and policing were pioneered in the colony and brought home to the metropolis, but that they were merely more visible. The historian of empire is thus teaching us as much about the rich world as about the poor. At least that is a hypothesis this rich and provocative work suggests.

Martin Thomas's rich and stimulating new book, *Violence and Colonial Order*, builds on his earlier work, most notably *Empires of Intelligence*, which examined the role of intelligence services in the maintenance of colonial order in the British and French empires, and *The French Empire between the Wars*, which discussed the political, social, and economic underpinnings of French imperialism during the inter-war years, suggesting that on the eve of war in 1939 the French empire exhibited serious and even fatal weaknesses.¹ In *Violence and Colonial Order*, Thomas brings together the two subjects to make an argument about the nature and fragility of European imperial rule between 1918 and 1940.

Several aspects of *Violence and Colonial Order* deserve attention. One is its impressive scope. The book's nine case studies encompass three European empires (British, French and Portuguese) and their colonies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Each case study is nourished by substantial work in various archives as well as by a deep familiarity with the secondary literature, both of which hallmarks of Thomas's previous work. Another noteworthy aspect is the focus on political economy. Thomas is well aware of the new imperial history which uses analytical tools from anthropology, cultural studies and subaltern studies among other fields to explore the nature, practices and effects of imperial rule in both the colonies and the metropolises; and in *Violence and Colonial Order* Thomas makes repeated references to this historiography. But for all his interest in these approaches, Thomas in the end distances himself from them by placing political economy at the centre of colonial rule. As he states: "political economy offers the best guide to understanding what colonial police were called upon to do" (2).

What does Thomas mean by political economy? "By political economy", he writes, "I refer to the connections between the changing political priorities and institutional forms of colonial government and those local economic activities that most concerned it" (25). More specifically, Thomas argues that a chief – and perhaps the chief – function of colonial rule was to extract wealth of various kinds from a colony for the benefit of white settler populations and European companies. Empire, at its core, was exploitative. For Thomas this reality is most evident in the organization of labour, which in all colonies was structured to encourage and compel local non-settler populations to participate in the colonial economy as manual workers in extractive industries. In this system of exploitation, moreover, the colonial police were a vital element. Although scholars have drawn attention to the role of the colonial police in the surveillance and suppression of communism and anti-colonial activity, Thomas insists that during the inter-war period the police were increasingly occupied with the repression of worker unrest, which initially at least was a response to harsh working conditions. In addition to confirming his argument about the importance of political economy, Thomas argues that this repressive activity

¹ Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); and *The French Empire between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

proved counter-productive. Most obviously, it did not resolve so much as heighten tensions by aggravating workers' grievances. At the same time, repression undermined colonial rule by exposing a basic failing: the political-economic system could not provide prosperity to everyone. Resort to repression was thus a sign of weakness and not of strength. However unintended, workers' protests became anti-colonial phenomena because the imperial authorities had little choice but to repress them. To do otherwise would have implied a thorough overhaul of colonial rule, which was politically and economically impossible.

Thomas's argument reminds me of Frederick Cooper's thesis on decolonization in Africa. Having accepted that African workers had the same political and economic rights as their European counterparts, the British and French authorities came to realize that this entailed vast expenditures that they judged unaffordable.² Reforming the political basis of colonialism was incompatible with the maintenance of colonial rule. But whereas Cooper focused on the wartime and post-war years, Thomas argues that this dilemma was evident, at least implicitly, during the inter-war period. More precisely, it was the global economic crisis during the 1930s that shook colonial rule at its roots. The drastic decline in the prices of various primary goods encouraged employers to push their colonial workforces harder, which in turn sparked more worker unrest and thus more repression. The economic crisis, in other words, made it clear that as a political-economic system, European imperialism was unviable.

I will leave it to area experts to assess the various case studies in *Violence and Colonial Order*. Instead, I would like briefly to discuss several points raised by Thomas's approach. The first one concerns the emphasis on the similarities in the function of the police in the different colonial settings. If we agree with Thomas that the preservation of an exploitative political-economic system increasingly dominated the activities of the colonial police, does this argument risk skating over the differences in the political, social and ideological structures of police forces – differences, it should be noted, which Thomas recognizes in his case studies? Stated differently, for whatever reasons, were some colonial police forces more active or complicit in the repression of worker unrest than others? This question leads to another one: by the end of the inter-war period were European empires as weak as Thomas suggests? Thomas's argument that the use of force itself was a sign of failure is intriguing. But if colonial police possessed a clear superiority (and perhaps even a monopoly) of the means of violence as well as the willingness to use these means, colonial rule could arguably be quite stable. After all, the Portuguese empire in Africa outlived the French and British empires by several decades. This stability was endangered, however, when the willingness to use force is called into question. Was this the case during the inter-war period? Was the repression of workers coming to be seen as illegitimate before 1940?

² Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labour Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

None of these points/questions are meant as criticism of *Violence and Colonial Order*. All studies raise more questions than they answer and the best studies such as this one raise big questions.

The financial crisis, decline in prices, and production falloff of the Great Depression badly affected the industrialized world and beyond, including European overseas possessions. Colonial companies foisted the downturn's costs onto the backs of laborers by slashing wages as well as health, housing, and other worker-related expenditures. As the drop in prices for raw materials drove budgets into deficit, colonial administrations re-concentrated their focus on key exports, the workers who produced them, and disputes that threatened production. Colonial police were often called on to enforce workplace rules and prevent or halt protests, which were many because of the downturn's severity.

Of course the economic slump was not the only problem colonial authorities encountered. The strikes, labor protests, and riots that police faced in the Belgian, British, and French colonies combined or overlapped with social and political problems resulting from emergent nationalist movements and longstanding grievances against discriminatory occupying regimes. All told, as Martin Thomas argues in this far-reaching comparative study, the interwar years and the Great Depression laid bare the essence of colonial police control efforts.

The real meaning and effects of colonial policing comprise the core of *Violence and Colonial Order*, although Thomas is of course not the first to address the subject. Others have adduced numerous factors to explain the character and significance of colonial policing, including the influence of metropolitan police traditions that migrated overseas and the type of preparation trainees received. Scholars have also studied the regional, ethnic, educational and other backgrounds of European police officers and their men; the experiences indigenous men brought with them into colonial police forces; the role of gender; racial divides between white officers and the non-Europeans they commanded. Looming perhaps largest has been how incipient or full-blown anti-colonial and nationalist movements shaped colonial policing.

Cultural, social, and political explanations have painted a picture of colonial police forces that contrast with each other. As Thomas notes, an "Irish flavour" distinguished British colonial police between the wars, a result of the large number of men it incorporated from the Royal Irish Constabulary after the latter was disbanded following Ireland's War of Independence (70). Although marked by a certain Irishness, British colonial police and their actions differed tremendously—from recently-federated Nigeria, across to India, the jewel in the crown of the British empire, around to the West Indies and beyond. In French Algeria nationalism, settler colonialism, and habits of the metropolitan gendarmerie contributed to a distinctive policing regime, which was just one of several among France's overseas territories. Policing after World War I in the Belgian Congo appears *sui generis* because of the *Force publique* inherited from the Leopoldian era, the colony's sheer size, and the lack of a Congolese nationalist movement. Examples of variation multiply.

Thomas does not dispute such differences but digs deeper to argue that scholars have neglected political economy in favor of cultural, social, and especially political factors. He argues that political economy was crucially determinative of colonial policing: “police operations reflected not just the colonial political order but its economic structures as well” (25). Strikes by industrial workers (by which Thomas means plantation laborers, mine workers, stevedores, and so forth) and workplace management issues were of increasing concern to the colonial powers from 1918-1940. As workplace regulation grew in importance, the “economic configuration of individual colonies” shaped the kind of policing that developed across the British, French, and Belgian empires (2).

Take for example the otherwise unrelated cases of Vietnam and Sierra Leone. They were similar in that a preoccupation in each with the production of one paramount raw material, rubber and diamonds respectively, shaped policing to protect business interests and, ultimately, colonial revenues. In Vietnam, “despite the vociferousness of new-style anti-colonialism . . . the focus of repressive policing lay elsewhere: in colonial Vietnam’s fastest-growing export industry, rubber production in the southern colony of Cochin-China” (145). Likewise, “Securing Sierra Leone’s minefields, monitoring their workforce and inhibiting black market trading occasioned more police work than anything else during the 1930s, despite the ferment of proto-nationalist opposition in Freetown” (276). Multiplying case studies beyond Sierra Leone and Vietnam, Thomas claims that “For all the national and regional variations encountered within and between the colonies studied, what emerge are shared preoccupations and similar patterns in the maintenance of European colonial order between the wars” (13). He justifies his claim with a stunning comparative underpinning, incorporating incisive local studies from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Vietnam, Malaya, Jamaica, Trinidad, British Guiana, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and the Belgian Congo.

The wealth of studies in Thomas’s book inevitably raises the question about which cases he passes over. How persuasive would Thomas’s recalibration be—i.e., more attention to political economy relative to politics, especially nationalism—if his analysis extended to India, the colony with the most well-developed nationalist movement by the 1920s and 1930s? What about Soviet Russia’s land-based empire? Reading *Violence and Colonial Order* reminds me of the importance given more recently to political economy when considering the Gulag’s expansion during the exact period Thomas examines. Policing dissent within Russia’s far-flung contiguous empire—even developments as traumatic as the 1937-1938 Great Terror—looks quite different when viewed beyond politics. What comes clearly into focus in the mass arrests and imprisonments beginning with the Bolshevik Revolution into the 1950s is the drive to populate Russia’s north and east in order to extract raw materials like timber and gold for export.¹ So why did Thomas exclude both India and Russia? Such a question would be largely impertinent if not posed facetiously, as is the case here. The already vast geographic and archival scope of *Violence and Colonial Order* places it in the realm of wide-ranging achievements such as Odd Arne Westad’s *The Global Cold War*.²

¹ Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

² Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Violence and Colonial Order's successful comparative approach suggests more work be done to break down the silos separating work on empire into discrete national cases.

Not only do numerous local studies make up the grist for Thomas's mill, they also allow him to illuminate specific local developments and provide additional insights. There was, for instance, the strikingly similar degree to which all the European powers blamed riots and labor protests on outside meddlers rather than recognizing the underlying economic structures and conditions that provoked such responses (248). There was also the ongoing, profound concern among French, British, and Belgian officials with communist activity in the colonies from the 1920s, which serves as a stark reminder that the Cold War really started in 1917.

Another insight is just how commonplace police repression was. "Collective violence and security force repression were more or less constant features in the political landscape" during the interwar years (8). Thomas asserts that such violence signaled colonial regimes' frailty rather than strength: "heightened colonial coercion derived from a lack of authority, not from the capacity of a powerful state to act without restraint. . . . Coercive policing, then, was a powerful indicator of the colonial state's limited reach" (74-75). And yet the sheer weight of examples in the book of far-flung European exploitation of raw materials, from the Maghreb to Southeast Asia to the Caribbean to West and Central Africa, indicates the raw, coercive and extractive power of European colonial empires. Nonetheless, Thomas reveals that violence indicated weakness in all European colonial regimes, not just in the well-known case of the comparatively anemic and brutal Portuguese empire.

Violence there was. The book disabuses us of any notion that bloodshed on the scale of the 1919 Amritsar massacre was somehow anomalous. Take the September 1930 aerial bombing of a peaceful protest in Vinh in French Vietnam that killed some two hundred demonstrators. Less obvious yet just as frightful is the number of Indian laborers driven to suicide on Malay's brutal rubber estates: forty-three in 1928 and forty-five in 1929, for example. Such violence was accompanied by official blindness to the reality of working conditions: administrators ascribed the suicides merely to "family trouble" or "melancholia" (191).

Examining the "role played by the police in the cycle of strikes, protests and repression" (221) leads Thomas to contend that policing affected the colonial situation to a greater degree than heretofore appreciated. I find this conclusion less persuasive, either because of a lack of evidence or questionable assertions of causation. Crackdowns to control growing labor unrest (like a strike in Tunisia for higher pay) "blurred the distinctions between conventional strike action and anti-colonial, pro-nationalist protest" (124). Blurred those distinctions for whom? It is credible that security forces exacerbated particular situations, escalated violence, and perhaps accelerated opposition to empire (212). But whether police repression generated nationalist opposition or cemented connections among colonial subjects who otherwise might have remained divided (or divided longer) is unclear. For example, indentured workers and day laborers in British Guiana supposedly banded together after plantation owners repeatedly called on police to deal with strikes. Thomas points to a note by the Commissioner of Labour and Local Government in British Guiana as

evidence of this growing association. Considering how often colonial officials got their intelligence about local affairs wrong—something that Thomas himself points out here and elsewhere³—it is doubtful that colonial officials accurately calculated the degree to which locals came together (221, 415 n. 70).

Like much of Thomas's other work, *Violence and Colonial Order* attacks the problems of colonialism primarily from the vantage point of European states and their actors, bringing with it the limitations such an approach entails. This is not an archaeology of colonial violence as experienced by those on the receiving end. Thus, it is probably going too far to say that "repressive policing was critical" not only "to the configuration of colonial rule" but also "to its eventual collapse" (5). Police repression was less a root cause of imperialism's demise and more a symptom of underlying economic exploitation, political oppression, and social discrimination.

The book is not always easy going. It covers so much ground so quickly that there are moments when its compactness detracts from its readability and others where a bit of confusion enters the text. French North Africa's gendarmerie, for instance, is described as, "An overwhelmingly French force with comparatively few Maghrebi recruits . . . French-officered, [it] relied on local personnel to make policing across ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural divides viable" (92). Was it white-officered with native Algerian personnel (presumably with a normal officer-to-soldier ratio), or was it overwhelmingly French? The book is driven above all by an analytical rather than a narrative approach, making it dense. Thomas tells the reader that the second chapter, on the lived experiences of colonial policemen, "travels the colonial world providing snapshots of colonial police lives, concerns, pressures and priorities between the wars" (43). But even here vignettes are scarce, such as two about police officers in West Africa (53-57). The "detailed, local accounts" Thomas promises early on (1) refer not to gripping and instructive tales of policing but to the case studies underlying the book. Of course I was not expecting Hill Street Blues or Maigret, but additional stories might have illustrated the book's points in more arresting fashion. Unlike some of Thomas's other books that I have used in the undergraduate classroom, this book is best suited for the graduate level and beyond.

Another factor that makes the book a challenging read is that its comparative nature invites a broad readership yet it demands a significant familiarity with the subject matter and the many regions covered. To help understand Algeria's gendarmerie, for example, we are told, "in terms of function, if not status, the Algerian gendarmerie bore less comparison with metropolitan brigades than with the political policing elements of the civilian police in France, the *police spéciale* (from 1937, *Renseignements généraux* (RG)) of the *Sûreté générale* and the *Direction des renseignements généraux* of the Paris police prefecture" (95). Readers unfamiliar with the history of the gendarmerie and civil policing in the Hexagon will have trouble getting the comparison.

³ Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

Ironically, an aspect of the book that could have been clearer is the exact meaning of the term ‘policing.’ Sometimes the word is used to specifically mean actions taken by colonial police forces, other times to embrace policing in general by anyone (i.e., the prevention, detection, and prosecution of violations of the law or regulations), be it by colonial police, colonial administrators, settler militias, or branches of the military including the gendarmerie, other armed forces, even the navy.

Many of the above concerns result from Thomas’s laudable ambition to cover a broad landscape and offer a widely applicable analysis. In sum, his book constitutes a critical addition to the literature on the workings of modern colonial states. Many authors whose books are reviewed in H-Diplo and other roundtables begin their responses by thanking the reviewers and the roundtable organizers. Let me conclude by turning the tables and thanking the editors and Thomas for this opportunity. Thomas has become a force among historians of imperialism, especially of French overseas empire. By my rough count *Violence and Colonial Order* is Thomas’s sixth book. He has co-authored another two books, edited three more, and produced some fifteen book chapters and 35 journal articles. His scholarly production could match the output of a decent-sized history department. More significant is the quality of his contributions. Over the course of the past fifteen years Thomas has for all intents and purposes re-written the history of the French empire after World War I with the trilogy *The French Empire between the Wars*, *The French Empire at War, 1940-45*, and relevant chapters in *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe’s Imperial States, 1918-1975*.⁴ His introductory essays for the dual volumes he recently edited on “the French colonial mind” are outstanding, proof that he is not only an indefatigable researcher in the archives but capable of penetrating synthesis.⁵ His strengths are wide-ranging diplomatic and political inquiry, comparison, exhaustive archival research, and nuanced arguments, eschewing overly ambitious pronouncements in favor of slicing through the apparently commonplace to reorient our view. He has done it again with *Violence and Colonial Order*.

⁴ Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War, 1940-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); idem, *The French Empire between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics, Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Martin Thomas, Bob Moore, and L. J. Butler, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe’s Imperial States, 1918-1975* (London: Arnold, 2008).

⁵ Martin Thomas, ed., *The French Colonial Mind, Volume I: Mental Maps of Empire and Colonial Encounters* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011); idem., *The French Colonial Mind, Volume II: Violence, Military Encounters, and Colonialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

Author's Response by Martin Thomas, University of Exeter

I'd like to begin by thanking all the reviewers for their comments, a practice, which, as Matthew Stanard notes, is customary fare. The gratitude, though, is genuine all the same. I had four main objectives in writing *Violence and Colonial Order*, to each of which the reviewers bring real insights. As is so often the case when theoretical ideas meet empirical evidence, what began as four seemingly straightforward issues to explore turned out to be more complex than I had initially imagined.

The first related to interpretation; namely, that colonial policing amounted to more than a by-product of hierarchically-ordered occupation regimes, a phenomenon of historical interest principally as a cultural manifestation of particular styles of imperial governance or colonial interaction. Policing, it seemed to me, was more central to critical transitions in the nature of colonial rule, and was fundamental to what imperial historians now describe with increasing analytical rigor as "the late colonial state."¹ And, as Raphaëlle Branche comments in relation to Ann Stoler's useful recasting of empires in terms of "imperial formations", observing the insistent, low-level brutality endemic to colonial working lives reveals "an inter-penetration of economic and political interests" that defies restriction to a particular empire or colony.² Reviewing levels of state violence internal to colonial states in the early twentieth century, I was struck by marked correlations in some places and sharp variations in others. Whether tracing similarity or difference, the incidence of such episodes was difficult to match, either with a rising arc of organised national opposition or with the emergence of particular imperial police cultures. Colonial policing, then, does not fit standard political narratives of nationalist or broadly anti-colonial awakening. Neither account for the ways in which socio-economic conditions, industrial unrest, and political dissent combined to catalyse police repression. (So, to pick up a point made by Matthew Stanard, mineworkers who supported Tunisia's increasingly militant trade union confederation during the 1920s and 1930s took strike action over pay and working conditions but also connected their differential pay-scales with the wider social and cultural discrimination that mobilised support for Habib Bourguiba's nationalist party, *Néo-Destour*.) Nor does the ethnic composition of individual forces, their cultural borrowings and presumptive views about various colonial 'others', easily explain what police personnel were doing and why. Something else seemed to account for rises or falls in the numbers of police killings and mass arrests. The fact that such police actions tend to be

¹ Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Late Colonial State in Indonesia: Political and Economic Foundations of the Netherlands Indies, 1880-1942* (Leiden: KITLV, 1994); Nicholas J., "The Frustrations of Development: British Business and the Late Colonial State in Malaya, 1945-57," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 28:1 (1997), 103-120; John Darwin, "What was the late colonial state?" *Itinerario*, 23:3-4, (1999), 73-82; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 2005), 143-8, 153-8; Martin Thomas, "Intelligence Providers and the Fabric of the Late Colonial State," in Jost Dülffer and Marc Frey (eds.), *Elites and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011), 11-35.

² Ann Laura Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," *Cultural Anthropology*, 23:2 (2008), 191-219.

consequent on civil disorder, or what Donald Horowitz memorably described as the “deadly ethnic riot” was clearly important.³ But so, too, were issues of location and duration, grievances or ‘trigger events’, and, of course, the identities of those caught up in the violence whether as protesters, detainees and victims, or as police.

The second issue to be confronted was simply this: who were the colonial police? Clearly, the types of policing enacted were intrinsic to the mounting violence within Europe’s overseas empires in the twenty years after World War I, to changing conceptions of ‘colonial order’, and whether that order was – or was not – upheld. As Matthew Stanard indicates, defining the term ‘policing’ is crucial, not least as the limits to police activity, while generally expanding in the early twentieth century, remained fluid. In this sense, the policing which I and others in this field have described is domestic or internal, and is locally focused on issues of social control. Both crime prevention and political policing, understood here as surveillance, infiltration, and containment or repression of organised oppositional groups, were aspects of this wider pre-occupation with social order. To be sure, that control related, in part, to social peace but its terms were determined by the colonial power. Unsurprising in itself, this point becomes pivotal when one recalls that colonial police were primarily agents of the state rather than representatives of the communities they policed. Colonial people, in other words, were policed but policing was rarely of the people.

Indeed, it is in their role as tax collectors, adjuncts to labour recruiters, and overseers of colonial workplaces that one discovers the uneasy equivalence between colonial police work and the imposition of social control colonial-style. A paradox here is that although colonial police forces were, to quote David Edgerton’s pithy phrase, “small and barely professionalised”, they could also be organisationally complex – as Stanard’s comment on the intricacies of French North Africa’s diverse police authorities makes plain. Typically led by white-officered police forces that were organised colony-by-colony, often along the lines of a paramilitary gendarmerie, by the early 1900s this type of police work frequently involved three additional components: ethnic outsiders who filled the subaltern ranks of individual forces; local irregulars especially prominent in rural police work; and various kinds of guards and vigilante groups that protected particular commercial installations, properties, or communities in times of crisis. The activities thus described should be distinguished from ‘imperial’ policing involving military formations dedicated to the defence of empire against external invasion.

Defining *who* the colonial police were or understanding the cultural roots of their behaviours, while valuable, would not in itself add greatly to debates about colonialism and the repressive structures embedded in it. The many excellent works on particular colonial police forces or on the movements and career paths of police within particular overseas empires offer a wealth of information about these questions.⁴ In general terms, much less is

³ Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 2001).

⁴ Some recent articles offering new local perspectives on colonial police forces include Gad Kroizer, “From Dowbiggin to Tegart: Revolutionary Change in the Colonial Police in Palestine during the 1930s,”

known or understood about *where* colonial police concentrated their efforts. This begs the attendant question of *why* they did so. Answering these questions – my third objective - pushed me towards the political economy approach that, as all the reviewers indicate, constitutes the book’s defining characteristic. The more I worked with colonial governmental and police records, which, again, as the reviewers shrewdly point out, are necessarily problematic sources, the more I found two boundaries disappearing. One was between imperial administrative authority and major colonial employers with a dominant role in the export markets of individual territories. The other was between regular or ‘state’ police and a variety of quasi-private security guards, labour overseers and vigilante groups (often organised by the management of the largest local enterprises) who variously protected sites of employment or enforced workplace discipline. These enforcers were sometimes to be found working alongside police; at other times, as Edgerton notes, their actions precipitated police intervention to contain the resultant protests. Finally, in a few locations, privately-recruited workplace police almost completely replaced their regular counterparts as in the case of the British West African colony of Sierra Leone. At their most extreme, as, for instance, in the rubber industries of colonial Southeast Asia or the mining compounds of West and Central Africa, the actions of this hybridised state-private policing network infringed colonial workers’ most basic rights – to food, shelter, and freedom of movement – often with fatal consequences.

Mention of these regional examples raises my fourth and last objective, which was to draw on comparisons across multiple European overseas empires between the World Wars to try and explain the preceding three issues, namely, what accounted for variations in police violence; working out who was involved, what they were doing, and why they were doing it; and using political economy as an analytical framework to do so. Using regional case studies to work comparatively has the advantage of making patterns and trends easier to discern but, as Stanard counsels, it inevitably runs the risk of omission. Why some colonies and not others? Why not, as Stanard suggests, focus more heavily on India, Britain’s primary colony, or on Soviet Russia, the largest of the contiguous land-based empires in which the forcible relocation and tight policing of workers, in terms of sheer scale, exceeded anything in the colonial experience of Britain, France or Belgium?

Aside from my own limits as a scholar, my answer here has three parts. The first, a little defensively, is that I have included Indian evidence in the book’s opening discussions of colonial police cultures, the relationships between government, police, and colonial employers (in this case, the immensely influential tea plantation owners of Assam), and notorious instances of inter-war civil protest. But Stanard’s point that organised Indian nationalist opposition pushed colonial policing to its worst limits is well taken. Critically, much of the consequent violence originated in workplace discrimination and inadequate

Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 32:2 (2004), 115-33; Prashant Kidambi, “‘The Ultimate Masters of the City’: Police, Public Order and the Poor in Colonial Bombay, c. 1893–1914,” *Crime, History and Societies*, 8:1 (2004), 27–47; Mark Finnane and Fiona Paisley, “Police Violence and the Limits of Law on a Late Colonial Frontier: The ‘Borrooloola Case’ in 1930s Australia,” *Law and History Review* 28 (2010), 141-71; W.J. Berridge, “‘What the Men are Crying Out for is Leadership’: The Khartoum Police Strike of 1951 and the Battle for Administrative Control,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39:1 (2011), 121-42.

food distribution in which police involvement was also considerable. Moving to the Soviet case, which takes me far from my home turf, I share Ronald Suny's viewpoint that the USSR fits the 'colonial empire' model insofar as the extraction of resources, the determination of ethnic identity and cultural attributes, and the concentration of political power served an identifiable elite interest above all.⁵ Here again, as Terry Martin's depiction of Soviet nationalities policy in what he's dubbed the "affirmative action empire" of the interwar years suggests, the Soviet state purported to be organising societies, peoples, and workplaces in unique ways.⁶ Finally, as to the wider point about which case studies to select, it perhaps bears emphasis that factors of political economy determined my original choices, the aim being to compare colonial territories at differing stages of industrial concentration, labour market development, and export prioritisation. These were the elements of economic production, which, as Edgerton notes, have not typically figured very much in new imperial history, let alone in studies of colonial policing.⁷ Reading beyond these case studies, my sense is that numerous other examples from other overseas empires – among others, the forced labour system in Portuguese Mozambique or the increasing centrality of coercive policing to rubber cultivation in Dutch-ruled Java – amplify the usefulness of closer attention to issues of colonial political economy.⁸

Branche, Talbot Imlay and Stanard have each commented on the equation I've made between heightened colonial police repression and the underlying weakness of colonial power. Broadening the argument to its most macro level, the issue here is whether the colonial lockdowns of the late 1930s represent imperial edifices beginning to crumble: not just a repressive turn but an incipient decolonisation. It was, in my view, the impact of the economic crisis that made that turn, and its decolonising consequences, so global in the 1930s. To draw only from the examples I've looked at in *Violence and Colonial Order*, it manifested from the British Caribbean, through French North Africa and the copper-belt territories of Central Africa, to a Palestine Mandate in revolt, as well as an Indian sub-Continent and Vietnamese territories in ferment as the Far Eastern War became a World War between 1937 and 1940. For all that, as Imlay and Stanard rightly say, the overseas

⁵ Ronald Grigor Suny, "The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, 'National' Identity, and Theories of Empire," in Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (eds.), *A State of Nations. Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 24-32.

⁶ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁷ A notable exception here is Stephen L. Harp's, "Marketing in the metropole. French rubber plantations and French consumerism in the early twentieth century," in Kevin J. Callahan and Sarah A. Curtis (eds.), *Views from the Margins: Creating Identities in Modern France* (Lincoln, NE.: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 84-107.

⁸ Allen Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1928-1961* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996), and *idem*, "Coercion, Paternalism and the Labour Process: The Mozambican Cotton Regime, 1938-1961," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18:3 (1992), 487-526; Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), and *idem*, "Perceptions of Protest: Defining the Dangerous in Colonial Sumatra," *American Ethnologist*, 12:4 (1985), 642-58.

empires survived. And their export extractions and the labour systems underpinning them were, if anything, set to become harsher still during World War II.

Perhaps, then, all this police activity was both less constitutive and less destructive of colonial authority than I've argued. Well, perhaps. But two things make me think otherwise. One connects to observations that Branche makes about the place occupied by colonial police as "economic nodes" in the structure of colonial rule, indeed as the face of the colonial state within colonies that were 'territorialised' into discrete political spaces through fiscal imposition, legal regulation and wage labour.⁹ If all this amounted to any kind of colonial 'system', it was one in which police activity was fundamental.¹⁰ Modern colonial empires were incapable of the fundamental redistributions of wealth, social privilege, and cultural capital necessary to govern by consent. Insofar as such radical reforms were attempted, they were necessarily part of letting go, not of hanging on to dependent territory. These were lessons that, I argue, were being painfully learned during the inter-war years.

Because the global economic crisis registered profoundly, but differently, in numerous colonial territories, the Depression was, to borrow Zara Steiner's image, the hinge, not just between the two inter-war decades, but between policing patterns reconfigured by changes in the colonial workplace consequent on much harder economic times.¹¹ In this respect, perhaps unsurprisingly, I share Edgerton's assessment that particular 'production sites', typically the large export conglomerates that dominated colonial economies, as well as the corporations that ran them, were essential cogs in the machinery of empire. Large colonial enterprises such as the Michelin brothers' network of rubber plantations in Cochin China (southern Vietnam) or the copper mines of the Union Minière du Haut Katanga in the Belgian Congo were also immensely disruptive social engineers. They moved people, whether indentured labourers, economic migrants, even entire rural populations, from one place to another, sometimes across Oceans (as was the case with the South Indian Tamils who worked British Malaya's rubber industry) to service their needs. This transnational indenture system, re-launched as a more contractual global recruitment system in the inter-war years, was utterly dependent on the police and their local adjuncts. And when it came under stress, so, too, did colonial administration. If *Violence and Colonial Order* is, in part about colonial policing and in part about the early unfolding of decolonisation, it is also a plea for the reinsertion of serious economic analysis in our evaluation of colonialism, its motivations, its dynamics, and its effects.

⁹ Leigh A. Gardner, *Taxing Colonial Africa: The Political Economy of British Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ A point that also emerges in Sylvie Thénault's study of punitive confinement in colonial Algeria, *Violence ordinaire dans l'Algérie coloniale : Camps, internements, assignations à résidence* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2012).

¹¹ Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History, 1919-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 635-7.

I began by thanking my reviewers and I'll end by thanking the organisers of H-Diplo, to which it is a pleasure and a privilege to contribute.

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